

Benchmarking Metrics and Comparison Cities for City of Austin, TX

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BENCHMARK OF PEER CITIES

A key factor in determining how well Austin Parks and Recreation is doing in providing park services is to compare it to the performance of other municipalities. While national averages are sometimes used to draw comparisons, it can be more instructive to make comparisons to cities that have been specifically selected based on certain criteria. For this exercise, five cities were selected and agreed upon by Austin Parks and Recreation officials and The Trust for Public Land staff. These cities were selected based on characteristics such as population, size, density, and governance type. In addition, the list was also designed to include “aspirational” cities known for their excellent park systems, which can serve as a model for Austin. These include Portland and San Diego, both of which rank highly in The Trust for Public Land’s ParkScore® Index. In the following pages, specific metrics on park system characteristics such as acreage and size of parks, spending, and recreational amenities are compared across these cities. This analysis aims to provide a direct comparison of peer municipalities in order to understand more about both the successes and needs of the Austin Parks and Recreation Department and the park system it manages.

The cities selected for comparison are:

- Atlanta, Georgia
- Dallas, Texas
- Portland, Oregon
- San Antonio, Texas
- San Diego, California

Austin is unique in many ways, and its park system reflects this. It is the state capital of Texas, and is home of the flagship campus of the University of Texas. The city is rapidly growing, experiencing a population increase of almost 23% since 2010. Long known for its thriving music scene, the city is also increasingly a hub for the technology and software industry.

The Trust for Public Land selected comparison cities that were experiencing similar growth, such as Atlanta (14% increase in population since 2010) and Dallas (13% increase in population since 2010). Atlanta is also a state capital, and thus a useful inclusion. It is important to include regional cities for comparison as well due to particularities that are unique to each state, so San Antonio and Dallas were included as among the largest cities in the state; they are the second and third most populous Texas

cities, respectively, with Austin coming in fourth. Cities were also selected that experience similar weather to Austin, as a similar climate means comparable challenges being posed to the park system in terms of maintenance, weather events, and amount of use. Finally, cities were selected that were comparable in population density, as shown in Table 1.

In all instances, the needs and preferences of the local communities, that is, the residents of each cities, should be high among the guiding principles used in planning a park and recreation system. To that end, findings from the Our Parks Our Future have been referenced in this document as well in conjunction with specific benchmarking metrics so as to set local context.

Table 1. Population density per acre

Place	Population	Density (people per acre)
Portland	637,683	7.8
San Diego	1,397,856	6.8
Dallas	1,323,651	6.1
Atlanta	464,043	5.5
Austin	935,806	5.2
San Antonio	1,442,472	4.9

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- The City of Austin has an expansive park system, but only **59% of residents live within walking distance to a park**. This is low both among peers and nationwide, where the median access score among largest US cities is 69%.
- On average, **Austin spends less than all comparison cities with the exception of San Antonio**. Public spending levels increased in 2017 though the city still falls behind cities Portland and San Diego, and spends the same amount per resident as Dallas does. Austin is at or below the median in all spending metrics considered, with the exception of non-profit spending as percent of public agency spending. This indicates that the city’s parks are heavily supported by philanthropic dollars.
- **Spending by parks non-profits makes up a significant portion of the park investment in Austin**. Fourteen percent of parks and recreation investment in Austin comes from parks non-profits, foundations, and conservancies.
- Austin is mostly well-served in terms of recreational amenities and facilities. The city falls above the median in 8 out of 24 amenities benchmarked, at the median in 5, and below in 7.
 - Austin does well compared to peers in terms of: bikeway, community garden plots, disc golf, dog parks, trails, splashpads, and swimming pools.
 - Austin falls below the median per capita score for: athletic fields, ball diamonds, playgrounds, restrooms, skate parks, and tennis courts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase park access; focus on areas of Austin that are lacking parks, and where possible prioritize filling park gaps in areas that are densely populated, as indicated in the Trust for Public Land’s ParkScore® and ParkServe® tools.¹
- Prioritize adding the following amenities: multi-use athletic fields including for baseball and softball, nature and environmental centers, and recreation and community/senior centers.
- In addition to the above amenities Austin should prioritize trails, both in terms of creation of new trails and maintenance and improvement of existing ones. Trails provide recreation and park benefits in and of themselves, while also increasing connectivity to existing parks.
 - The Long Range Plan community survey (2019) also indicated a strong preference for natural areas and amenities that allow for various recreational uses, particularly trails. Trails in particular improve connectivity to existing parks while offering exercise and access to nature inherent to themselves, and as such they’re an important part of any park system.
- Look for opportunities to expand the parks budget; while well-supported by private groups the city would benefit from increased public funding, especially in the form of operations and maintenance dollars.

PARK SYSTEM METRICS

The Austin Parks and Recreation System is expansive, spanning 19,171 acres and over 300 individual parks. The Colorado River runs through the city, and a great system of trails and waterfront parks offer access to the river as well as to its tributaries and other bodies of water throughout Austin. The crown jewel among these is Zilker Park, home to Barton Springs Pool, the Austin City Limits Music Festival, and much more.

In terms of total acreage per 1,000 residents, Austin falls in the middle of the pack compared to peers; San Diego, Portland, and San Antonio offer more parkland acreage per 1,000 residents than Austin does. Austin’s parks are fairly large, though; with a median park size of 8.7 acres the city has larger parks than all comparison cities besides San Antonio.

Table 2. Acres of parkland per 1,000 residents

Place	Acres of parkland	Acres of parkland per 1,000 residents
San Diego	48,059	34.4
Portland	14,505	22.7
San Antonio	30,086	20.9
Austin	19,171	20.5
Dallas	27,038	20.4
Atlanta	5,002	10.8

¹ www.parkscore.tpl.org and www.parkserve.org

Table 3. Median park size in acres

Place	Median park size (acres)
San Antonio	11.7
Austin	8.7
Dallas	7.8
San Diego	6.8
Portland	4.9
Atlanta	2.9

ACCESS TO PARKS

One of the most important measures of the quality park system is how accessible the parks are to residents. Table 4 indicates how many residents in each place have walkable access to parks within 10 minutes. This is measured through GIS analysis based on the public road network, and takes into account barriers to foot traffic such as gates, rivers, or highways without crossing points.

Only 59 percent of Austin residents live within a 10-minute walk to a park. Portland, San Diego, Atlanta, and Dallas all have higher percentages of park access than Austin does, with only San Antonio having less.

These findings correlate with Question 7 in the Long Range Plan survey which asks, “Do you feel there are adequate parks and useable green space within walking/biking distance from your home?” to which just under half (44 percent) of residents responded that they did not, with an additional five percent reporting that they were unsure. While the terms “adequate” and “useable” as well as the more loosely defined measure of access by walking or biking are more open ended than the 10-minute walk, it’s clear that more and better access to parks is needed for the city of Austin.

Table 4. Walkable park access

Place	Percentage of the population with a 10 minute walk to a park
Portland	89%
San Diego	79%
Atlanta	71%
Dallas	79%
Austin	59%
San Antonio	42%

PARKS AND RECREATION INVESTMENT

This section covers the investments being made in each municipality’s park and recreation system. There are a few different ways in which this information has been broken out in order to better draw comparisons.

Table 5 shows total spending on parks and recreation for Fiscal Year 2017. This includes all spending on landscaping and maintenance, recreational programming, administration (including salaries), and debt

service, as well as expenditures from the capital budget including land acquisition and capital improvement projects. These figures include all spending by any agency that owns or operates parkland within city limits. In the case of Austin this includes the Austin Parks and Recreation Department and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, which operates McKinney Falls State Park.

Spending by the City of Austin is mid-range and comparable to Dallas, both of which spent \$117 per resident in FY 2017. This is more than either Atlanta or San Antonio, the lowest spenders, invested in their park system, but less than Portland and San Diego.

Table 5. FY 2017 Total Spending

Place	Total spending	Spending per resident
Portland	\$142,065,948	\$223
San Diego	\$220,834,502	\$158
Dallas	\$154,595,224	\$117
Austin	\$109,216,806	\$117
Atlanta	\$45,149,159	\$97
San Antonio	\$126,440,937	\$88

Table 6 presents a similar spending figure, representing both operational spending and capital spending combined, but this time over a three-year average to account for fluctuations in capital spending, which can vary widely from year to year.

The average spending information shows that Austin is historically a low spending city. Portland and San Diego remain the highest spenders, and on average Austin spends less than \$100 per person, less than Portland, San Diego, Atlanta, and Dallas.

Table 6. Average total spending past three fiscal years (2017, 2016, 2015)

Place	Three-year spending average	Spending per resident
Portland	\$119,275,920	\$187
San Diego	\$185,583,398	\$133
Atlanta	\$57,764,546	\$124
Dallas	\$133,867,810	\$101
Austin	\$91,691,181	\$98
San Antonio	\$130,007,856	\$90

Table 7 includes only operational spending for each city’s most recently completed fiscal year. Operational expenditures reflect the everyday maintenance of a park system, including lawn mowing, weeding, trash removal, and more, and can be an indicator of the general state of maintenance of the parks. In terms of operational spending, Austin again is on par with Dallas and below Portland and San Diego.

Table 7. Operational spending FY 2017

Place	Average operational spending	Spending per resident
Portland	\$107,518,206	\$169
San Diego	\$140,131,051	\$100
Dallas	\$131,556,968	\$99
Austin	\$92,247,441	\$99
Atlanta	\$38,988,806	\$84
San Antonio	\$92,719,007	\$64

Private Spending

The following is a list of the nonprofits operating within Austin with a focus on parks and recreation:

- Austin Parks Foundation
- Downtown Austin Alliance
- Hill Country Conservancy
- Pease Park Conservancy
- Shoal Creek Conservancy
- The Trail Foundation
- Waller Creek Conservancy

These groups spent a combined \$17,440,202 on parks and recreation in Austin within Fiscal Year 2017. This makes up 14 percent of Austin’s parks and recreation spending. Table 8 compares non-profit spending for each of the benchmarking cities for Fiscal Year 2017. Austin’s parks and recreation system receives a significant amount of non-profit and conservancy support – these investments make up 14 percent of parks and recreation related expenditures. By comparison, non-profit contributions make up 28 percent of parks related spending in Atlanta. It should be noted that both Austin and Atlanta have a very effective umbrella parks organization that works across the city: the Austin Parks Foundation and Park Pride in Atlanta. Besides these two, private spending in the rest of the cities is far lower. Notably, non-profit spending only makes up two percent and one percent respectively in San Diego and Portland, the two highest spenders and highest-ranked park systems. Note that total spending for conservancies equates to the “total expenditures” number reported on the most recently filed Form 990, which includes administration related spending.

Significant investment by non-profits and philanthropic groups is a good source of funding and support for city parks; this indicates that the park system is well-loved by city residents. Non-profit spending provides support above and beyond what public dollars are often able to do. However, these investments should not replace public expenditures, and in cities with significant private support for parks, care should be taken that these private groups do not take the place of public agency funding and government support. Public parks should be publically funded, with non-profit dollars lending extra support.

Table 8. Non-profit spending on parks and recreation

Place	Total private spending	Private spending as percent of total spending
Atlanta	\$17,955,097	28%
Austin	\$17,440,202	14%
Dallas	\$9,440,458	6%
San Diego	\$3,923,561	2%
San Antonio	\$1,502,986	1%
Portland	\$1,046,350	1%

KEY FACILITY TYPES AND ASSOCIATED LEVELS OF SERVICE

The tables below compare key facility types by the total amount available system wide. The facility types were chosen for benchmarking based on input from city staff so as to highlight amenities that are most important and valued in Austin. These facilities reflect the recreational activities and services that are most important to the residents of Austin, and which therefore should be prioritized by the city in ongoing operations and maintenance as well as in planning for the future. The numbers listed in the following tables include all facilities and amenities available within each jurisdiction. In places where multiple agencies operate parks and recreation facilities the numbers are an aggregate of the facilities of all agencies.

Table 9 shows athletic fields per 10,000 residents. These are multi-use fields and include both fields that may be informal and available on a first-come, first-serve basis, as well as those that are available on a more formal basis via reservation such as for tournament play. In some cities there is a strict distinction between these fields, and in others all fields may be reserved but are otherwise available. Note that the numbers below reflect individual field counts, not acres of fields.

The numbers on athletic fields among the comparison cities for Austin are fairly close – most cities offer around one to two fields per 10,000 residents. Austin falls toward the bottom of this with 1.1 per 10,000 residents, but is essentially on par with its peers.

Table 9. Athletic fields

Place	Athletic fields	Fields per 10,000 residents
Atlanta	108	2.3
Portland	115	1.8
Dallas	167	1.3
San Diego	202	1.4
Austin	102	1.1

San Antonio	84	0.6
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Table 10 shows baseball and softball diamonds per 10,000 residents. This is an amenity that Austin would do well to invest more in; with 0.7 diamonds per 10,000 residents the city has the least amount of diamonds per residents out of the comparison cities. Doubling the existing amount of ball diamonds by adding another 70 would bring them to 1.5 diamonds per 10,000 residents, putting them more on par with peer cities, though still on the low end.

Table 10. Baseball and Softball Diamonds

Place	Baseball and softball diamonds	Ball diamonds per 10,000 residents
San Diego	312	2.2
Portland	122	1.9
Atlanta	82	1.8
Dallas	230	1.7
San Antonio	130	0.9
Austin	70	0.7

Table 11 illustrates bike path mileage within the city per 10,000 residents. This is as maintained by parks and recreation agencies; there may be other bikeways that are maintained by other agencies as well. Austin leads the comparison cities, having the most miles of bikeway per 10,000 residents. This is commendable, as biking was listed as among a preferred activity in the Long Range Plan survey (Question 15) and trails and paths for various purposes consistently ranked high in preference as well.

Table 11. Miles of Bikeway

Place	Bikeway miles	Miles per 10,000 residents
Austin	166	1.8
San Antonio	222	1.5
Dallas	188	1.4
San Diego	142	1.0
Portland	66	1.0
Atlanta	40	0.9

Table 12 reflects community garden plots per 10,000 residents, pertaining to community gardens that are on public parkland. Portland is an outlier with 35.3 plots per 10,000 residents, thanks to a thriving city-run community garden program.² Austin ranks next, however, indicating that residents are quite well-served by community gardens. Garden plot numbers were not able to be obtained for San Diego or Dallas.

Table 12. Community garden plots

Place	Community garden plots	Plots per 10,000 residents
Portland	2,253	35.3
Austin	527	5.6
Atlanta	247	5.3
San Antonio	102	0.7
San Diego	n.a.	n.a.
Dallas	n.a.	n.a.

Table 13 shows disc golf courses per 100,000 residents. Though the sport has been growing in recent years,³ including in urban parks, courses are still somewhat few and far between. Austin is ahead of the curve, leading among comparison cities with 0.53 courses per 100,000 residents. Six percent of Austin residents listed disc golf as among the three sports/recreation programs they wanted to see increase in the city, placing it third in importance (Question 5). Given this and the sport’s growing popularity nationwide, disc golf should be a focus for Austin in the coming years.

Table 13. Disc golf courses

Place	Disc golf courses	Courses per 100,000
Austin	5	0.53
Atlanta	1	0.22
San Antonio	3	0.21
Portland	1	0.16
Dallas	2	0.15
San Diego	1	0.07

Table 14 shows off-leash dog areas per 100,000 residents. Dog parks continue to grow in popularity and number around the country,⁴ and Austin seems to be mirroring this trend. Dog parks were listed fifth among options that Austin residents wanted to see increase in their parks (Question 3), with 5 percent of respondents wanting more dog areas.

Austin is already well-served in terms of dog areas compared to peers, with 1.3 dog areas per 100,000 residents, just behind Portland which is an outlier. Given the growing popularity of this amenity,

² <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/parks/39846>

³ <https://www.dgpt.com/news/could-disc-golf-surpass-golf>

⁴ <https://www.tpl.org/dogparks>

however, and that they were identified as desired in the survey, Austin should consider dog parks as an amenity to add if there are parts of the city without a dog park easily accessible.

Table 14. Dog parks per 100,000 residents

Place	Off-leash dog parks	Dog parks per 100,000 residents
Portland	33	5.2
Austin	12	1.3
San Diego	16	1.1
Atlanta	4	0.9
San Antonio	11	0.8
Dallas	4	0.3

Table 15 reflects golf courses per 100,000 residents. The numbers are very close across the comparison cities for this amenity, with Austin having as many golf courses per 100,000 as San Diego and San Antonio, though fewer than Portland and Atlanta.

Table 15. Golf Courses

Place	Golf courses	Golf courses per 100,000 residents
Portland	8	1.3
Atlanta	6	1.3
San Antonio	8	0.6
San Diego	8	0.6
Austin	6	0.6
Dallas	6	0.5

Table 16 reflects nature and environmental centers managed by each city or by public park agencies within that city. Nature and environmental centers provide valuable opportunities for residents to learn about plants, animals, and the natural world around them, and as such are important educational components to a great park system. In the Long Range Plan survey, 16 percent of respondents listed nature centers as the top facility that they wanted to see more of in Austin (Question 4). The city should focus heavily on nature centers as these are a priority to residents, and Austin currently ranks low among comparison cities, with 2 nature centers for 0.2 per 100,000 residents. Adding one or two more centers would help the city better serve its residents on par with peers.

Table 16. Nature and environmental centers

Place	Nature centers	Centers per 100,000 residents
Portland	7	1.1
Dallas	6	0.5
San Antonio	5	0.3
San Diego	4	0.3
Austin	2	0.2
Atlanta	1	0.2

Table 17 shows trail mileage within each city. This includes all types of trails, both improved trails such as gravel, or more natural, unimproved trails that may be dirt or just marked with blazes. Trails are important amenities in that they both provide recreational and nature-based benefits inherently, by providing opportunities for exercise and access to nature. They also improve connectivity throughout a park system by providing access to existing parks.

Austin is well-served by trails already, with 2.6 miles per 10,000 residents. However, in the Long Range Plan survey trails consistently rank at the top in terms of importance placed on them by residents, including 12 percent of respondents ranking them as the number one option that they want to see more of in Austin’s park and recreation system (Question 3). Given this preference for trails, and because of the multiple benefits they provide, both creating new trails and improving existing trails should be a priority for Austin. Trail mile data was not able to be obtained for Atlanta and San Diego.

Table 17. Miles of trails

Place	Miles of trails	Trail miles per 10,000 residents
Portland	170.6	2.7
Austin	241	2.6
San Antonio	282	2.0
Dallas	158	1.2
Atlanta	n.a.	n.a.
San Diego	n.a.	n.a.

Table 18 shows playgrounds per 10,000 residents. This includes both playgrounds at public parks as well as playgrounds available at school facilities which are open outside of school hours through a joint-use agreement. Austin falls behind all comparison cities in terms of number of playgrounds per 10,000. While playgrounds rank highly as amenities often used in the Long Range Plan survey in questions, they rank fairly low in terms of amenities that users want to see more of, indicating that playgrounds and play areas could be considered a lower priority for Austin’s park and planning staff.

Table 18. Playgrounds

Place	Park playgrounds	School playgrounds	Total playgrounds per 10,000
Atlanta	138	0	3.0
Portland	136	0	2.1
San Diego	268	0	1.9
Dallas	200	32	1.8
San Antonio	228	27	1.8
Austin	134	15	1.6

Table 19 shows recreation and senior centers combined per 10,000 residents. These centers provide a multitude of opportunities for residents, from offering exercise or cultural classes to providing community event and gathering spaces. They are important multigenerational facilities that people of all ages, abilities, and needs can enjoy. In the Long Range Plan survey, residents ranked such centers highly; 14 percent listed multigenerational centers as second most important and 10 percent listed community centers that offered both recreation and cultural opportunities as third most important (Question 4). Austin ranks low among peers, with only 0.3 centers per 10,000 residents placing it second to last. Centers that offer recreation, culture, art, and community use should be prioritized by the city.

Table 19. Recreation and Senior Centers

Place	Recreation and senior centers	Centers per 10,000 residents
Atlanta	35	0.8
San Diego	67	0.5
San Antonio	54	0.4
Dallas	43	0.3
Austin	26	0.3
Portland	19	0.3

Table 20 represents permanent restrooms per 10,000 residents. Restrooms are an important part of any parks system, as these facilities help extend the stay of people in parks, and can improve the experience especially for families with young kids. Austin is in the mid-range for these facilities, with 1.2 restrooms per 10,000 residents. In the Long Range Plan survey, restrooms were identified as a need in district and metropolitan parks (Question 20) but not necessarily in other areas. Nevertheless, restrooms are important facilities, and adding around 30 restrooms (to bring the total to 145) would put Austin more on par with peers, at 1.5 restrooms per 10,000.

Table 20. Restrooms per 10,000

Place	Permanent restrooms	Restrooms per 10,000 residents
Portland	141	2.2
San Antonio	222	1.5
San Diego	206	1.5
Austin	115	1.2
Atlanta	28	0.6
Dallas	16	0.1

Table 21 represents parks for skateboarding. Skate parks have seen some growth around the country in recent years as they've begun to be recognized as popular parks. Because skateboarding can cause significant wear and tear on park amenities such as benches and railings and also pose safety threats including to non-skateboarding park-goers, skate parks are important in providing space for these activities that can withstand use and reduce risks. Austin falls in the mid-range among the comparison cities, with a total of 3 parks and 0.3 per 100,000 residents.

Table 21. Skate Parks

Place	Skate parks	Skate parks per 100,000
San Antonio	16	1.1
Portland	7	1.1
San Diego	10	0.7
Austin	3	0.3
Atlanta	1	0.2
Dallas	1	0.1

Table 22 reflects splashpads or spray grounds per 100,000 residents. These water features provide the opportunity to cool off and play in water without needing to know how to swim. They can be less water-intensive than pools because they can operate on a flexible schedule, rather than needing to remain filled, and they don't need a lifeguard present. As summers grow hotter, splashpads are increasingly important as equitable ways to survive and thrive in the heat. Additionally, they were listed among features that Austin residents already enjoyed at parks (Questions 15 and 19) and would like to see more of (Questions 3, 16, and 20). With 1.8 splashpads per 100,000 residents, Austin is fairly well-served, putting it third among peers. Adding five more would move it up to tie with Atlanta, and even better serve the city.

Table 22. Splashpads per 100,000 residents

Place	Splashpads	Splashpads per 100,000 residents
Portland	16	2.5
Atlanta	11	2.4
Austin	17	1.8
Dallas	11	0.8
San Antonio	5	0.3
San Diego	2	0.1

Table 23 shows swimming pools per 100,000 residents. While splashpads are increasingly becoming a common alternative to swimming pools, pools still provide great recreation and exercise opportunities and remain popular. Austin is well-served by pools, coming in second among the comparison cities with 3.7 pools per 100,000 residents.

Table 23. Swimming pools

Place	Swimming pools	Pools per 100,000 residents
Atlanta	20	4.3
Austin	35	3.7
San Antonio	28	1.9
Portland	12	1.9
Dallas	20	1.5
San Diego	13	0.9

